

# NEVER LAZY



Autumn 2013 —

## Breathe Creativity

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PROGENY, 48" X 78", OIL, ENAMEL  
& SHELLAC ON CANVAS, 2013





# Samantha Keely Smith

## Internal landscapes

New York-based fine artist Samantha Keely Smith paints expressive emotional and psychological landscapes ridden with power, hostility and beauty. Yet there is also a certain fragility to the abstract scenes she creates, as they appear to evoke unstable, tormented feelings as well as echo the symbolic destruction of the human soul. We spoke to the artist who shares her experience of the industry so far, her move from figurative to abstract painting, and her ultimate desire to make a connection with the viewer through her magnetic work.

How would you describe your artistic style?

I would say it's abstract, but other people often refer to it as semi-abstract landscape.

Tell us a bit about your educational background and experience as an artist...

I went to art school and got my BFA degree in Painting from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. I'm not sure that I learned all that much about painting when I was in school, though. I learned the basics from an artist I studied with briefly when I was 17, and after that it felt like it was a matter of doing a lot of painting, experimenting and learning from my mistakes. I was always working from these images in my head which weren't very concrete, so it's been 20-something years of chasing what I see in my mind and developing the necessary technical skill to capture that. I'm getting closer all the time, >





but I feel like I constantly need to change tactics slightly, as if I'm pursuing something that doesn't want to be caught. But I enjoy the challenge because it keeps things interesting for me.

My experience as an artist has been a rather unusual one. I didn't expect, or even try, to show in galleries when I first graduated from Art School, because I believed I needed years of work to get to a place where my work was saying anything close to what I wanted it to. My first experience showing with a gallery came almost ten years after I graduated from University.

I'm currently selling my own work, as I have found it very hard to find a gallery that is the right fit for my work. I've been lucky to have shown with wonderful galleries with great reputations in the past, but ultimately I felt these situations were not right for my work. I have been selling my work directly to collectors on my own for years. It's been wonderful to have direct contact with people who love my work because of my website; I have people writing to me from all over

the world who feel a connection with my work, and some of these people become collectors who then champion my work and introduce my paintings to new people, which makes me think that my work is resonating with these people on a deep level.

I realize that to make a living as an artist in this way, without a gallery, is a very unusual situation, and I feel grateful that I have been able to do that. I feel that making a connection with the viewer is the final stage of my artwork, and without that it is incomplete, so my ultimate goal is to have my work shown in museums so that as many people can connect with it as possible. I'm sure I will eventually find the right galleries to move forward with towards this goal.

Much of your recent works seems inspired by oceanic landscapes. Could you tell us more about this?

My images are not at all real places or even inspired by real places. They are emotional and psychological places. Internal land-

scapes, if you will. The tidal pull and power of the ocean makes sense to me in terms of expressing these things, and I think that is why some of the work has a feel of water about it. My work speaks of things that are timeless, and I think that for most of us the ocean represents something timeless.

I think my work sometimes gets compared to artists like Turner and Church, because at a certain point their work was speaking in almost purely emotional terms and approached semi-abstraction. I work in a way that has much in common with nineteenth century landscape painting on both a technical and visual level, but this is not a conscious choice on my part. I work in colours that I feel best reflect the images that come to me, and the emotions that those images stir up.

I always wanted to express things that were not dependent on any boundaries of place, language, time, etc., and I hope that my work speaks to the essence of our desires and fears as human beings. My work really needs to be seen in person to be fully appreciated. >

Time and attention from the viewer are required. I've been told by my collectors that the more time they spend living with the paintings the more they see in them. I'm glad that the online images of my work manage to convey some of the presence of the paintings, but they are a poor substitute for the real thing.

How would you say your approach to painting has evolved over the years?

I used to do figurative work, although it was always somewhat dreamlike and not very realistic. That continued until about 1999, when the paintings gradually became more abstract. The earlier work was mostly based on recurring dreams I'd had since I was very young, and at the time the paintings helped me figure out what the dreams meant. Once that happened I felt free to move on to paintings that attempted to capture an inner world based mainly on emotion, and how that world intersected or sometimes collided with my reality. For this it made sense for the work to be more abstract. The work I'm doing at the moment definitely has a feeling

of some sort of landscape or place, but it has nothing to do with real places. They are emotional and psychological places, as I said earlier.

Working figuratively when I first started painting, and for many years after that, really helped me learn to be a better painter technically. I learned so much about colour and form that has been vitally important to the way I work now. Working in abstraction is much more difficult for me than figurative work was. When I had a concrete image to work from, even if it was just an image of a person from a dream, I knew whether I was getting there. Abstraction for me is dealing in a world of mysterious ever-changing things, where there are no rules to follow, or to break. It's exciting and frustrating and never, ever boring. I have a head full of these images, clamouring to get out, and I just hope that I will have enough time in my life to get most of that onto canvas.

Painting for me is a necessity. I have no other outlet for these images and emotions, and I'm pretty sure I'd be a basket case without >

















it. It is also a joyous thing that I look forward to doing every day.

Tell us about your use of colour and texture to convey particular concepts or stories...

My paintings evolve in an organic way. The first layer is a jumping off point: what I start with often disappears completely by the end of the painting. The images I'm trying to convey are so fleeting that I can never be totally sure of what I've seen, like something you see out of the corner of your eye. It's an often difficult process, and the paintings take a long time to finish because of this – usually one and a half to two months each, with me painting about 60 hours a week. I only know a painting is finished when I can see there is nothing “off” about it, and it feels like what I saw in that first glimpse.

I never really consciously think about colour or texture because I am just chasing that image in my mind. I think I was much more conscious of those things when I was working figuratively because there was a framework to work within - but with what I am doing now, it's wide open.

What challenges have you faced as a creative individual?

Finding a way to make a living and also finding the necessary time to do my painting was a huge struggle for many years. I worked in restaurants and nightclubs and painted on my days off, trying to fit in as many hours in the studio as I could. Working in restaurants also meant that for all those years I missed all the art openings and any chance to socialize with artists and make connections, which was disappointing.

Basically, when I'm not painting for more than a couple of days I start to feel strange, and the more time I'm away from it the worse I feel. Now I paint all the time - which still feels like not enough time - and support myself through selling my work, but that means that I have to keep finding a balance between being true to myself as an artist whilst also being a salesperson of my work, which is not at all in my nature. But making a living as an artist and painting full-time is the only option for me if I want to remain sane, so I am sure I will find a way to keep doing that.

Are you preparing any upcoming exhibitions or projects?

I'm working on a series of smaller paintings. My instinct is always to work even larger than I already do, so this is a new and exciting challenge for me. I am also planning to make a beautiful large-format book of my recent work this Autumn, that will be available for sale.

A word of wisdom to share with us?

Never, ever give up no matter how many times you get knocked down. That sounds cliché, but it's so important for artists to have the strength to do this. I've got a stack of rejection letters that numbers in the hundreds from the years when sending out slides was the thing to do. It never made me doubt myself as an artist. I always believed the galleries were the ones missing out by passing up on my work. Developing a strong sense of self-worth seems to be a requirement for an artist. You have to believe in yourself and your work before anyone else will, especially since we artists are already our own worst critics. •

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